DaDA

Background Notes

Richard Thomas - 19 May 2021
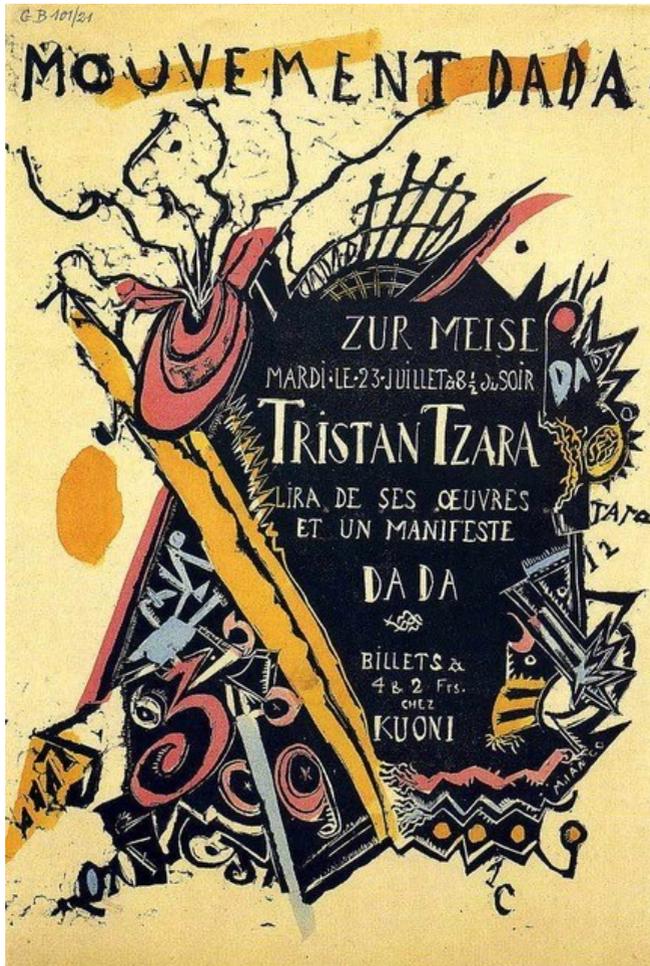
Marcel Janco, *Mouvement Dada Poster,* 1918

On February 5th 1916, DaDA was launched at the opening of the Cabaret Voltaire in the picturesque old quarter of the Zurich Niederdorf. German poets Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings had obtained permission from the Meirei café in Zurich to use a small backroom as a venue for art performances.

Ball recorded the preparations in his diary on February 2nd 1916:

"Under this name a group of young artists and writers has been formed whose aim is to create a centre for artistic entertainment. The idea of the cabaret will be that guest artists will come and give musical performances and readings at the daily meetings. The young artists of Zurich, whatever their orientation, are invited for suggestions and contributions of all kinds."

It was collaboration amongst an international set of dissident artists escaping and reacting to the nightmare of the First World War. The performers and provocateurs at the Cabaret Voltaire arrived during the early months and years of the First World War in neutral Switzerland. The principal figures were from Germany, Romania, Poland and Switzerland. The bond between them was an anarchic spirit of jubilant and defiant nihilism. Hugo Ball had studied sociology and philosophy at Munich and Heidelberg (1906–1907) and translated the anarchist theories of Bakunin, although he rejected anarchist philosophy for its militant aspects.

The story for choosing the absurd name for the group is that a paper knife was inserted at random into a French-German dictionary and pointed to the word "dada". In Romanian it also meant "Yes,yes…" as in a facetious "yeah, right…"

Hugo Ball at Cabaret Voltaire - 1916 reading his poem *Karawane*

At the opening, German artist Hugo Ball performed the sound-poem, "Karawane." Ball's cardboard costume, designed in collaboration with Romanian artist Marcel Janco, further defied the logic of everyday existence, rendering his speech even more extraordinary.

The Cabaret Voltaire offered a social space where there was permission to step outside the moral scrutiny of polite Zurich society. Anarchist sympathies prevailed among the participants who developed a culture of resistance and opposition to conventional values.

On behalf of the group, Tristan Tzara published a manifesto in 1918 that managed to oppose even the idea of publishing manifestos.

> *"I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things,*
>
> *and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am also against principles."*
>
> (TRISTAN TZARA, *Manifesto Dada,* 1918, published in DADA 3)

The Dada group can be seen as offering a variation on Italian Futurism in their performances and experimental forms of expression, but Dada derided Futurist celebrations of modernity.

The absurdism of Dada performances had also been foreshadowed by the outrageous and satirical puppet theatre of Alfred Jarry which caused a riot in 1896 in Paris with *Ubu Roi*. Jarry's humour had remained a reference point for anarchic avant-garde artists ever since. When Marcel Janco and Sophie Taeuber created masks, costumes and puppets at the Cabaret Voltaire they did so for an audience with an appetite for Jarry's anti-authoritarian provocations.

Defying rational precepts, Jean Arp in collaboration with Sophie Taeuber formulated chance methods for generating forms and composition in visual art and poetry. Arp writes, *"I met Tzara at the 'Odeon' and the 'Café Terasse' in Zürich, where we were writing a cycle of poems called 'Hyperbole of the Crocodile-Hairdresser and the Walking-Stick.' This kind of poem was later called 'Automatic Poetry'."* 'Arpian humour' was soon a feature of Dadaism.

Jean Arp, *Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance ,*1917,
torn & pasted paper, 48.5 x 34.6cm, MoMA, NY.

In their performances Dada artists assumed impersonal chanting voices while hiding their faces with masks and concealing the contours of their bodies in costumes that emulated non-European models. Richard Huelsenbeck who cultivated ritualistic chant in his delivery, had a longstanding friendship with Hugo Ball and came to the Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916 after being invalided out of the German army. Huelsenbeck annoyed the world with the air of a loud, noisy upstart. In January 1917, he moved to Berlin, taking with him the methods that helped him found the Berlin Dada group.

BERLIN DADA

German Dadaists' explicitly engaged with politics while Zurich Dada was rarely overtly political. Hugo Ball once described neutral Switzerland as "*a birdcage, surrounded by roaring lions.*"

On arrival in Berlin, a chaotic city riddled with corruption, Huelsenbeck demanded that to have any relevance in Germany Dada must become more provocative than in Zurich and ready to *'make literature with a gun'*. The most political of the Dadas, Huelsenbeck saw his art as a weapon carried on the artistic wing of Marxism. Joined by Franz Jung, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader, they stormed the Weimar Diet, throwing down leaflets and declaring themselves rulers of the Globe.

Berlin Dada revolved around Huelsenbeck. Entry to Club Dada had first to be approved by Huelsenbeck, who could reject people for no good reason, even refusing membership to Kurt Schwitters because of his '*bourgeois face*'.
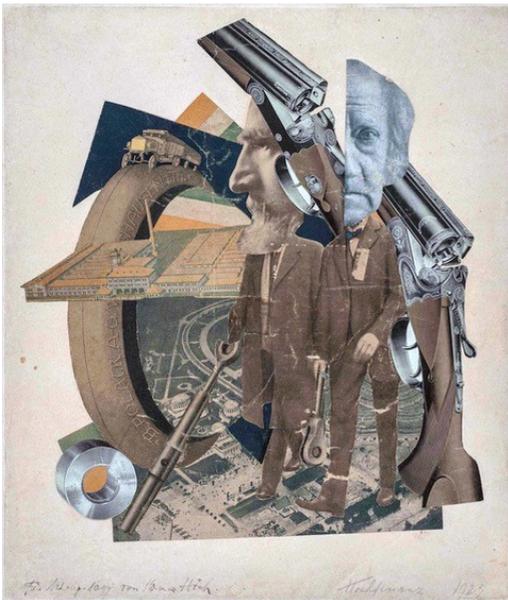
Hannah Höch, *Hochfinanz (High Finance),* 1923, Collage, 36 x 31 cm, Galerie Berinson, Berlin

Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch and John Heartfield were Berlin Dadaists who pioneered photo-montage. Subverting material from mass-media communications they satirised the propaganda of war-mongering capitalists. Through the 1930s Heartfield, an organiser of the First Dada Art Fair in 1920, managed to sustain strident photo-montage satirical attacks on Hitler. He circulated them in Germany from his base in Czechoslovakia until it was necessary to escape to England in 1938.

First International Dada Fair, Berlin, 1920

HANOVER DADA

Kurt Schwitters developed his own version of Dada in Hanover. Schwitters salvaged art from everyday waste which he entitled or subtitled '*Merz'*. He combined oil paint with commercially printed waste materials to produce subtly balanced geometric compositions. Schwitters extended this examination of ordinary, overlooked details to poetry and performed 'sound poems' that explored variations within the pronunciation of single letters. Schwitters invented the word *Merz* by chance taking it from the longer *Kommerz*, which had fascinated him for its sound. Beginning in 1923 he transformed eight rooms of his house into a three-dimensional environment, the *Merzbau*. It was destroyed in a British air raid in October 1943 and no longer exists.

Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau, 1923-37,* photo, 1933

Schwitters was invited to perform on Dada tours by I.K.Bonset, a sound-poet from Amsterdam, published by De Stijl magazine. I.K.Bonset was in fact van Doesburg, editor of de Stijl. Constructivism and De Stijl shared an objective with Dada of freedom from bourgeois art. It was often a joint venture.

COLOGNE DADA

Jean Arp travelled in 1919 to Cologne (Köln), and founded the Cologne DaDa group with Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld. Meanwhile, Parisian poets in the group Littérature experimented with automatic writing and free-association. They found however that their attempts at free-association usually betrayed literary preoccupations. With Max Ernst however, they discovered somebody whose vocabulary extended from the technical languages of engineering or psychiatry to obscure information as in an encyclopedia. He was invited to come to Paris, moving there in 1922 to join poets André Breton, Paul Éluard, George Limbour, Philippe Soupault and Michel Leiris.

NEW YORK

Three artists in New York together arrived at an approach thoroughly in keeping with European Dada. Francis Picabia had introduced Marcel Duchamp to the work of the philosopher Max Stirner. Max Stirner was a materialist philosopher opposed to all idealization. Stirner addressed the human urge to resist being trapped by previous versions of the ego, and explained that our motive for thinking is to escape from being trapped by the systems of thought we produce.

Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray, refusing to be defined by previous notions of artistic practice, granted themselves freedom to rewrite the rules of art. At odds with excessive reverence for art and for scientific knowledge, they developed a visual nonsense language that combined erotic references with mechanical engineering symbolism.

Female alter-egos allowed them to escape fixed male identity and as Rrose Sélavy, Marcel Duchamp introduced the non-art object "readymade" to the categories of art. *Fountain* is the classic 'readymade', a urinal exhibited as an artwork in order to test the commitment to freedom of a liberal exhibition institution that had declared its democratic principles. While claiming that all who paid to participate would be included and their work shown, the urinal was deemed inadmissible and excluded. Duchamp published an essay making the case for regarding any 'readymade' as an artwork.

Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain,* 1917

Meanwhile, Picabia travelled between New York and Barcelona organising exhibitions and publishing his own itinerant periodical, '391'. In Paris he became an international figure-head of Dada. A Zurich Dadaist declared that Picabia's painting "*confronted us with a radical belief in unbelief, a total contempt for art.*"

The scandal generated by the Dada movement was brilliant but short-lived. Its nihilism was superseded by ambitions amongst the same writers and artists to achieve politically idealistic, socially progressive aims, giving rise to Surrealism.

Further Reading

Read about the boxer-poet Arthur Cravan:
Edward White, *Arthur Cravan, the Original Troll,* in *The Paris Review,* January 5, 2018
https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/01/05/arthur-cravan-original-troll

Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism (Art & Ideas),* Phaidon, Paperback, 1997

Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918: Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire,* Anchor books, Paperback, 1961

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William Seaton, *Dada Poetry: An Introduction*
ISBN 81-8250-035-4 Hard 2013

Raymond Roussel, *Impressions d'Afrique*

Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*
Also *Ubu Cocu* and *Ubu Enchainé*

Alastair Brotchie, Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life, MIT Press, 2015
ISBN 10: 0262528436
ISBN 13: 9780262528436

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